

OVER THE LEVEE:  
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF EDUCATION IN HELENA-WEST HELENA, ARKANSAS

Amy Charpentier

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in the School of Education (Culture, Curriculum and Change).

Chapel Hill  
2007

Approved by  
George Noblit, Ph.D.  
Lynda Stone, Ph.D.  
James Trier, Ph.D.

© 2007  
Amy Charpentier  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

# **ABSTRACT**

Amy Charpentier

Over the Levee: An Autoethnography of Education in Helena-West Helena, Arkansas  
(Under the direction of George Noblit, Lynda Stone, James Trier)

Zinn (1964) argues that the conditions of the Mississippi Delta mirror the most controversial traits with which the United States grapples. Through autoethnography and the examination of literature, photography, historical accounts, and personal interaction, my thesis explores these controversial traits as they relate to education and as they occur in Helena-West Helena, Arkansas.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I have many people to thank for their help. First and foremost, I offer my immense appreciation to my parents for their constant support in all that I do and all that I wish to become, who taught me courage and provided me with education that gave me the freedom to question and fight. To my students whose lives I have had the opportunity to enter into, I only wish that you had learned as much from me as I had from you. To my colleagues and principal at S.T.A.R.S. Academy who welcomed me, who encouraged my unorthodox teaching style, and who supported my students as we broke rules, and who believed that we were making a difference, I cannot imagine having undertaken this process and graduate education without your insistence and support to do it. To my Delta roommates (and almost roommates), Lizzie, Kelly, Jesse, and Debbie, who listened to my stories, who talked educational theory, who tested my theories in their classrooms, and who shared my passion for our students, I owe you more than I can ever repay for helping me remember stories while I wrote my thesis. To my friends at work, particularly Kris and Shae, who constantly asked about the progress of my thesis and who made it possible for me to leave and research in the Mississippi Delta, thank you for understanding. To Stephen Johnson and Mrs. Ludie Johnson who allowed me to examine Rogerline Johnson's photographic work and who spent many hours answering questions, digging up resources, and listening, I appreciate your openness and willingness to share your story and your loved one's work. To Dr. Alford-Cooper who taught me lessons before I ever needed them, thank you for teaching. To my committee (Dr. Noblit, Dr. Stone, and Dr. Trier) for their comments and support during this very long process, thank you again and again.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF IMAGES.....	1
Section	
I. IMAGES.....	2
II. ARRIVAL .....	15
III. GEOGRAPHY .....	18
IV. METHODOLOGY .....	20
V. DRAWING LINES .....	25
VI. HELL .....	27
VII. LEARNING TO TEACH .....	36
VIII. RETURNING TO HELENA-WEST HELENA .....	44
IX. CONCLUSION.....	48
REFERENCES .....	51

## LISTS OF IMAGES

### Image

1. “There are no shortcuts.” .....	2
2. Black Cemetery .....	3
3. White Cemetery .....	3
4. Ruins .....	4
5. Rural Store .....	5
6. Lake View .....	6
7. Industry 1 .....	7
8. Industry 2 .....	8
9. Helena Harbor .....	9
10. Hope and The Blues .....	10
11. Gardens of E.D.E.N on Walnut Street .....	11
12. Gateway to Change .....	12
13. S.T.A.R.S. Academy .....	13
14. Cherry Street .....	14
15. Walnut Street .....	15

## IMAGES



Image 1

*"There are no shortcuts."*

Helena Community Center, Helena, Arkansas 2006



Image 2  
*Black Cemetery*  
Oak Grove Garden, West Helena, Arkansas, 2006



Image 3  
*White Cemetery*  
Maple Hill Cemetery, Helena, Arkansas, 2006





Image 4  
*Ruins*  
West Helena, Arkansas, 2006



Image 5  
*Rural Store*  
Wabash, Arkansas, 2006



Image 6  
*Lake View*  
Lakeview, Arkansas, 2006



Image 7  
*Industry 1*  
Port of Helena, Helena, Arkansas, 2006



Image 8  
*Industry 2*  
West Helena, Arkansas, 2006



Image 9  
*Helena Harbor*  
Levee, Helena, Arkansas, 2006



Image 10  
*Hope and The Blues*  
Helena, Arkansas, 2004





Image 11  
*Gardens of E.D.E.N.*  
Walnut Street, Helena, Arkansas, 2006





Image 12  
*Gateway to Change*  
Helena Bridge, Helena, Arkansas, 2006



Image 13  
*S.T.A.R.S. Academy*  
Helena Crossing, Helena, Arkansas, 2006



Image 14  
*Cherry Street*  
Cherry Street, Helena, Arkansas, 2006



Image 15  
*Walnut Street*  
Walnut Street, Helena, Arkansas, 2006

## ARRIVAL

I am in control.

I have power.

I can be or do anything that I want.

I had never doubted these three aphorisms; nothing in my life had ever suggested that these statements were anything but the truth.

“Ms. Charpentier,” Kiyana<sup>1</sup> rolled her eyes at my suggestion, “ain’t nothing gonna change if we write a letter or go talk to someone.” Slumping back in her seat, she pointed out, as she smacked her lips, “No point in us trying.” She stared intently, waiting for my response, challenging me.

How does she know it won’t work, I wondered.

A quote I’d read often, “Never doubt that a small group of...” popped in my head.

But before I got the chance to repeat it, “never worked before,” a classmate echoed. A chorus of agreement ended the discussion. I had clearly lost the debate. I could not understand why my students refused to act when they were obviously aware and vehemently opposed to the racial and economic inequity they had highlighted. My dare, to do something, anything, was shot down by their staunch belief that they had no power to affect change locally, or anywhere else.

That afternoon, at my desk, I sat with tears of frustration and anger dripping down my checks, smudging the ink in my grade book.

---

<sup>1</sup> My students’ names have been fictionalized. Later in the paper, several S.T.A.R.S. Academy students, none of whom I taught, are named correctly. In this case, the student writers were published web authors whose poetry is publicly accessible via the internet. In order to give them credit for their work, I chose to use their real names.

“If I cannot convince my students that they had power, what was the point of all of this – my classroom, the readings, my life in the Delta.,” I say to no one. The empty walls absorbed my frustration. I was not there to maintain the status quo, I sighed quietly, defeated.

Forty-four foster homes, twelve imprisoned fathers, no electricity at Maleek’s, no phone for the Queens, frozen pipes at most houses, seven teenage fathers... I counted the injustices, one by one, that day. Overwhelmed, barely twenty-two, the depth of the problem was more than I was prepared to handle. I went home unable to imagine that I could have an impact on anything. I doubted that I had power, not then, not there.

When I arrived there, the Delta, I did not come alone. Sixty other Teach for America corps members arrived with me. Our arrival was expected; though I doubt anticipated by anyone other than school administrators, struggling to fill empty classrooms. I know now that it had nothing to do with our ability to teach but that we were/are outsiders. We did not/ do not understand how life in the Delta is.

I came to the Delta to teach mainly by happenstance. At twenty years old, I decided to apply to teach through Teach for America because I yearned to put my idealism to work. My application was filed electronically five minutes short of the midnight deadline, extended as a result of September 11th. Simultaneously, I had begun the application process for law school. Though I had never desired to be a teacher, my school experience had allowed me to see the world, both figuratively and literally. In the days post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, I thought that I could make my difference through teaching. An education that I understand now was exemplary, rigorous, challenging, and liberal led me to believe that I was powerful, that I had full control over my destiny, that I could be or do anything I desired. Because I had developed such a fervent belief in education as powerful, I believed that one must only be

shown that education is exciting in order to believe in the power of education. Having been educated in public, private, and parochial schools, I was confident that I had enough school experience to show my future students how exciting education could be. After all, I reminded myself, I had worked with non-profit and civic organizations to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and help teach the illiterate to read, how much harder could teaching possibly be.

Oppressively hot, the day I arrived, the tableau outside my car window was motionless. As I drove through Vicksburg on Highway 61, the bluffs gave way to a vast flatness. On either side of the road, bright green grass paddies marked the fertile land. I drove for several miles, interrupted only by swooping crop dusters, before I encountered another person, animal, or car. The lushness of the crops suggested health and vitality; but the vigor was juxtaposed by the houses, antebellum and doublewide alike, rotting, caving in on themselves, entangled in kudzu<sup>2</sup>. Children and dogs sat in front of the rotting structures transfixed by the infrequent breeze when it came, or listless until the next round of excitement happened. In one town, a group of twenty children stood around a power truck as the utility workers changed a street lamp globe. As I continued up the highway, a driver here or there would offer a two finger salutation over the top of his steering wheel. Along the way I'd pass squat, slipshod buildings proclaiming to have the best blues music or the hottest tamales.

---

<sup>2</sup> Kudzu is an invasive vine that is present through much of the Southeast. Originally used to prevent soil erosion, it now covers much of Crowley's Ridge in Eastern Arkansas and often subsumes abandoned structures.

## **GEOGRAPHY**

By the end of my first week in the Delta, I had traveled its entire length on Highway 61 from Catfish Row in Vicksburg, Mississippi to the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. Several writers, most notably David Cohn, have suggested that the Delta begins and ends at these two tourist destinations. Technically, I have been told and read that the Delta I know is not actually a delta; it is more of an alluvial plain nourished by repetitive flooding of the Mississippi Delta. The geographic Delta stretches just south of Memphis on either side of the Mississippi River to just north of Vicksburg (Cobb, 1994).

The Arkansas side of the Delta is often forgotten to the Mississippi side; there are few popular tourist destinations. Despite the lack of soul-selling and famous movie star turned restaurateur, the two sides of the Delta share a socio-cultural geography (Cobb, 1994), in addition to a physical geography. Both sides were inhospitable lands that were eventually turned into plantations owned by wealthy White Southerners and maintained through slave labor.

“There are lots of old houses here,” I tell my grandmother. “Down the street, there’s a house that construction was started on before the Civil War. During the Battle of Helena, the troops hid out to protect themselves from incoming shots in its freshly dug basement. Once, the river used to lap where my front sidewalk is.” I failed to mention that the same house, two down the road from me, is no longer occupied, all of the windows broken long before I arrived, the owner in jail. I do not share that we see an ambulance nearly every day



on our street, carting someone to the hospital. I definitely do not tell her about the screams, the gun shots, or my fear of being alone in my cavernous house.

The area today is characterized by intense poverty, substandard housing, and high rates of teenage pregnancy, illiteracy, joblessness, and declining health, particularly among the African American population. Both sides are prone to flooding. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers oversees the levees to protect the towns along the river. The soil, I am told, is still rich and full of nutrients.

Researchers (Zinn, 1964; Cobb, 1994) suggest that this area serves as a mirror of the struggles that occur throughout the entire United States. Because of the poverty, the rurality, and the history, the conflicts that are historically pushed aside elsewhere are amplified. Cobb writes

...the Delta actually functioned as a mirror within a mirror, capturing not just the South's but the nation's most controversial traits in mercilessly sharp detail. Hence, when one looked closely at the Delta's polarities of self-indulgence and suffering, what seemed at first glance to be a regional legacy that refused to fade began to suggest instead the bittersweet fruits of a larger, even more powerful and enduring national obsession with wealth, status, power, and pressure. Behind the seductive disarming Old South façade of the Delta, the American dream had been not so much perverted as simply pursued to its ultimate realization in a setting where human and natural resources could be exploited to the fullest with but little regard for social and institutional restraint" (Cobb, p. 320).

Cobb's (1994) and Zinn's (1964) writing suggests universality, or maybe foreshadowing of universal problems, of the struggles with which the Delta grapples.

## METHODOLOGY

When I left my classroom to pursue graduate school, I did it not just because I believe that there was an urgent need for renewal in the Delta but because I realized that my experiences in the Delta were a mirror of a larger systemic problem.

“Ms. Charpentier, youkintoher?” a student asks as we wait in line for the restroom on the second or third day of school.

“What? Can you repeat that?”

“Areyakintoher?”

“Umm. I’m not sure what you’re asking.”

Another teacher interrupts. “She wants to know if you are kin to her.”

“Oh. Nope.”

My students struggled with who I was, because they had no way of classifying who I was or connecting me to anyone or anything they knew. I was not related to the few White people they knew. Each time a white person entered our campus, the question was quickly repeated. After the first time, I had less trouble understanding it, though it always caught me off guard because I had explained countless times that I had no family in Arkansas and very few relatives west of the Mississippi River.

In my own journey through graduate school, I often feel that same desire to search for a relationship or a connection with the research I am reading or discussing to my experience as a teacher. Like my students, I wanted to ask questions of the authors to classify them, to

figure out where they fit in, or to decipher their experiences. Unlike my students I do not often have the privilege of posing the question my students would so often ask me. However, my inability to ask the question does not prevent me from wanting to know more. Because my research is more about Aaric, Jameel, Winter, or LaKenya than it is about data sets, objectivity, or value-free research, I have struggled to come to terms with the language of most research that I have read.

“Who are these people?” I ask a former teacher and friend.

“Can you imagine if they taught in Helena?” I say rhetorically. “What do you think her class is like?” I continue.

I do not intend for these conversations to mean I have discounted the research, though I generally do, when I cannot make some connection to my own experience because my research and my teaching are inextricably linked. If it were not for the LaDaniels, the Kyeishas, or the Martins, I would not be here writing a thesis now. I imagine, maybe a little too philosophically, that education is a place where emotional connections are explored, mulled over, and used to create a culture of knowledge. I am partially misguided because, “...emotional connections tend to be suspect in a world where the mind is valued above all else, where the idea that one should be and can be objective is paramount” (hooks, 2003, p. 127). If my reading for classes is any example, then my desire is far from the reality of education, graduate education included.

Through my own reading, I find solace that I am not the only one who worries about this disconnect, even though I rarely get the chance to discuss it with colleagues. Yet, I still struggle with undoing the disconnection between researcher and participant, love and academic discourse, passion and knowledge.

At least in my mind, this exploration is a capstone, not only of my educational experience as teacher and graduate student but also of my beliefs. I have chosen, very deliberately, to represent my beliefs in a form that is true to who I am and what I've struggled to teach as an educator and to do as a graduate student. I want you to understand the context of my work. I want you to hear the stories and voices of my experience. I want you to help.

As a result, I am constructing this paper as an autoethnography, a form that I believe best exemplifies who I am and what I believe. Much of how I write is based on Carolyn Ellis and her writing on autoethnography. Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as "...writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. ... Usually written in first-person voice.... [Autoethnographies] showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness. (Ellis, 2004, pps. 37-38) In writing this autoethnography, I reconstruct dialogue from my memory and from memories of those with whom I worked and lived. I reconstruct events when possible from my own memories and the recorded memory of the *Daily World*, the local Helena-West Helena newspaper. The pictures I have included were photographed while I lived in Helena and also on a return trip to Helena-West Helena when I began writing my thesis.

As much as I want to tell these stories, I want to do it through love – for myself and my experience, for the community where I taught, and for you, the reader. I refuse to "... [reinforce] hierarchies of power and control ... [where] students are encouraged to doubt themselves, their capacity to know, to think, and to act" (hooks, 2003, p. 130). Because these same hierarchies of power and control have ignored situations and places like the Delta,

I choose not to “...reinforce the third person, passive voice as the standard which gives more weight to abstract categorical knowledge than to the direct testimony of personal narrative and the first person voice” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) through my own work. Because almost no research exists on topics of education as they relate to the lived experiences of students in the Delta, I must rely on my knowledge and the knowledge of those with whom I have interacted.

And so I aim to demonstrate love (hooks, 2000) for subject through providing a context beyond one data set, one observation, or one experience. I will explore the writings, images, and stories of others. I do not want to take for granted that there are experiences that are different from my own that have value in the retelling of my story. I try through the various sources “...to mix various ingredients – care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication” (hooks, 2000, p. 5).

As a result, I have examined local newspaper articles that deal with schooling, images and icons of the community, online forums, conversations, personal experience, and literature. Like any research, I have a limit to what I can use. In the case of my paper, I have narrowed it down to examine the experience of schooling in one Delta community. This community, Helena-West Helena, Arkansas, is fairly similar to those that surround it, almost all the surrounding towns are ethnic enclaves with similar histories. Likewise Helena-West Helena suffers from the same blight, in some ways to a greater extent and in others to a lesser extent than the surrounding area. My thesis is meant to use Helena-West Helena as an indictment of a system that perpetuates inequality and inequity; it is also a personal plea for something greater for this town and its people.

Through the course of my research, I have worked in and with the people of Helena-West Helena. I recognize that there are limits to what I know and can do in the timeframe with which I have spent there. I acknowledge that some of what I write may not be accepted as truth. Further I suspect that some may vehemently disagree with what I write. But I write sincerely from my experience; but it is just that, *my* experience, skewed by my reading of the world and my own experience. I want you to know that I respect the work that has been done and is being done because despite the hardships that the people in the community face, I have no desire to see this town die. I am committed, out of my own experience with this town and my concern for its people, to see it thrive. While I try to present a balance of the challenges and the possibilities, it is the challenges that make this work imperative.

## **DRAWING LINES**

“Did you see that? There wasn’t a single black person in that party,” I remarked to my roommates, who had also just returned from a welcome party for new Teach for America corps members at the local bank. I was shocked. In this county that is greater than sixty percent African American, there had been no more than one or two African American town residents at this gathering. Christmas parties thrown by neighbors and supporters of the Mississippi Delta Teach for America corps, certain restaurants and churches would be either black gatherings or white gatherings. Clear distinctions of race were drawn.

To this day I am still struck by the dichotomy that remains in Helena-West Helena. Two main streets, two museums, two histories – one black, one white.

Grim at best, the statistics fail to capture the dual worlds of Helena-West Helena, Arkansas, though they reflect the sad reality of the town. Since the 1990 census, the county has had an eight percent population decrease. Currently forty-seven percent of those sixteen years or older are not in the labor force. The per capita income rests at \$12,288, just slightly above its 1990 level. Thirty percent of all families live in poverty; fifty percent of families with children under five live in poverty. For several years the county has earned the distinction of being one of twenty poorest counties in the country. Perhaps this in recognition of the town’s lack of economy or that approximately sixty-two percent of the county’s population has earned a high school diploma, both of which have allowed the entrenched poverty to persist. Furthermore, thirty-one percent of those between the ages of

twenty-five and sixty-four are classified as disabled. The African American population has been hit disproportionately by the high rates of poverty. The school district, now nearly universally African American, is in academic and fiscal distress, taken over by the state for inability to maintain adequate financial records, among several reasons.

Like the racial divide, the drive through town offers a similar juxtaposition. One road nearly avoids the blighted areas, allowing you to miss the most squalid houses. The other allows you to meander, examining the fish shacks, charred housing, crumbling school structures. Just beyond this road, the devastation screams. In town, the Phillips County Library Museum exhibits fine crystal, wedding dresses, signs from Lindbergh's first flight over Helena-West Helena, and war memorabilia. This is the White museum. The Delta Cultural Center highlights the Blues, the town's descent into poverty, and pictures of racial segregation. This is the Black museum.



## **HELL**

“Let me see that ring again,” my school principal asks the jewelry salesman, as we spend our free time shopping during an out-of-town conference break. Her request is almost flirtatious. He inquires as to where she’s from.

“Hell-no, Arkansas.” She says it with a straight face. Dressed in her business attire, looking directly into his eyes, her voice is drippingly pleasant but completely serious. I attempt to hold back my shock at this exchange.

Rapping in front of the school during a poetry slam, a group of students chants, “Hell Town, give it up. Hell Town give it up. Hell Town, Arkansas.”

On the one hand, Hell Town and its permutations have become an affectionate nickname for the town, but it is also a derision of the town’s current and historical state. During the Civil War, war records have accounts of soldiers who were hit by disease at astronomical rates because of poor sanitary conditions, clouds of mosquitoes, and low-lying flood prone land. The soldiers, even then, referred to the town as Hell-in-Arkansas (Kohl, 2004).

Historically, Helena has not been an agreeable town. But even during the Civil war, a glimmer of hope, a sense of control, was at least marginally present. As far back as the Civil War, lost and abandoned African American children were provided an education and shelter by the Society of Friends. The Southland School, and later Southland College, would, in

1880, become a college that provided diplomas and trained African American teachers. It would also be one of the first Southern colleges to have an integrated faculty.

Shortly after the Civil War, Samuel Clemens proclaimed the town productive, full of “...good cotton trade; [handling] from forty to sixty thousand bales annually; she has a large lumber and grain commerce; has a foundry; oil mills, machine shops and wagon factories – in brief has \$1,000,000 invested in manufacturing industries” (Moore, 1994). But as it is now, a good portion of the money in town as probably controlled by a small group of individuals.

Shortly before the Southland’s School’s renaissance and the height of King Cotton<sup>3</sup>, the county’s black residents organized nearly 1,600 Arkansas African Americans with a desire to move to Liberia, now known as the back-to-Africa movement. At that point in history, the town was represented by a black state legislator and at least one black sheriff. Historical accounts do little to suggest how African American Republicans had made inroads to politics. However, the white Democrats, in fear of losing workers, fought the Republicans to regain control. The white Democrat population, clad in red shirts, used two large cannons to frighten the black population from voting and threatened death. The black county sheriff tried to divide the offices – half Republican, half Democrat – to avoid bloodshed and to placate citizens. As his plan began to fail, the Democrat ticket was aided by an outbreak of illness that required quarantining a significant percentage of African Americans and resulted in the disenfranchisement of many Republicans. While the group of back-to-Africa members was only partially successful in relocating African American Arkansans to Liberia, it did demonstrate that the population had considerable influence in politics and economics at the

---

<sup>3</sup> King Cotton refers to an era in the South that was characterized by large cotton crops that fueled the local economies.

time, as well as some control over their destiny. Additionally, Helena's centrality to the back-to-Africa movement placed it in the center of politics and economics in Arkansas (Barnes, 2004).

Yet, Richard Wright's own writing<sup>4</sup> in *Black Boy* at the beginning of the early twentieth century suggests that prosperity was not ubiquitous even then. In writing about his experience in Helena-West Helena, he describes his enjoyment in "...wading in the sewage ditch where we found old bottles, tin cans that held tiny crawfish, rusty spoons, bits of metal, old toothbrushes, dead cats and dogs, and occasional pennies" (Wright, p. 60). He also goes on to explain that he was so hungry that he tried to sell his dog to be able to satiate his appetite.

Despite the lack of prosperity, diversity was *de rigueur*. The recent Tamale Trail oral history by the Southern Foodways Alliance tracks the history of Mexican laborers, as well as Pasquale St. Columbia's emigration from Italy to Helena, Arkansas. According to photographs in the Delta Cultural Center, taken by local NAACP photographer, Rogerline Johnson, Magnolia's Place located just off of Cherry Street provided entertainment to a diverse group of Mexican and African American laborers. And Richard Wright's memoir tells of the corner grocery owned by a Jewish proprietor.

However, the diversity did not come without racial tension. The black children, Wright included, would taunt the Jewish residents. Wright recounts a popular rhyme, "Bloody Christ killers / Never trust a Jew / Bloody Christ killers / What won't a Jew do?" (Wright, p. 61) Establishments such as Magnolia's existed off Cherry Street, the white main street, because African Americans and Mexicans were denied entry to most white

---

<sup>4</sup> While Wright does not write extensively about his time in Helena-West Helena, he lived in Phillips County during a portion of his boyhood years. During his short time in Phillips County and West Helena, he witnessed the death of a family relative in the Elaine Race Riots.

establishments on Cherry Street, including the Malco movie theater. At the same time, most immigrants and non-whites controlled very little capital and worked in service industries or as farm labor, harvesting cotton crops by hand.

Despite the racial tension, most racial groups were able to influence and make many decisions for themselves about schooling. While African Americans still relied on the school district for funds, teachers had a degree of freedom in choosing curriculum and the supplemental texts shared with children, I am told by my former colleagues. Today elementary school teachers in town are forced to follow scripted curriculum, performing the same tasks at the same time throughout the school.

“Ms. Charpentier, you know I used to go to this school when I was in elementary school,” one of my school’s aides told me one day as I was teaching.

“Really?” I asked incredulously.

My school was located in the middle of a field, now soybean, but previously a cotton field. The school yard was just a few hundred yards from the levee of the Mississippi River. Pecan trees lined the outer perimeter of the property. An old piece of playground equipment rested in the middle of the play yard my middle and high school students never used. The school had three corridors but we occupied only the first and two classrooms on the second. The third held old computers, one similar to those that I used in the 1980s, piled up to the ceiling, strewn with textbooks, desks, chairs, and the occasional dead bird. Many of our classroom windows were broken or cracked, replaced by plexiglass. Heating systems had long ago died or operated inconsistently. On warm days, bees swarmed into the classroom from wood-slatted ceilings. Infrequently snakes would slither into classrooms and underneath teacher desks. Even when it was originally built, I imagine that the school was a somewhat

inhospitable environment, particularly during the very hot and cold weather. We were the school farthest from the district office, on a rural factory road, which allowed certain activities to go unnoticed but also kept us out of sight. The intent when the school was built during the 1940s was to hide the black children away in a field, I am sure.

“It was segregated then. The teachers were all black. But they really cared. We’d have a king and queen crowning. Teachers would read stories to us. They’d discipline us if we misbehaved. Most of all I remember singing *Lift Every Voice and Sing* each morning instead of the *National Anthem* or saying the *Pledge of Allegiance*.”

The stories I have heard are reflected in the work of Rogerline Johnson. He compiled one of the most compelling local histories of life in the town during the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to the Brown decision, Johnson, a teacher in an even more rural town outside of Helena, was commissioned by the NAACP to photograph the segregated black and white schools of the Delta. His work captured the similarities and disparities between the two schools. In addition to his work in schools, he also photographed friends and neighbors going about their normal daily and cultural activities. He managed to preserve images of the town during one of its strongest economic periods. Unfortunately, many of his twenty-five thousand images are uncatalogued in his studio and unavailable for examination. The Delta Cultural Center, in its recent exhibition “Helena, Arkansas: Main Street of the Blues” describes the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as an economic boom for the community. The Center characterizes the town as thriving, managing to have twelve department stores, five car dealerships, three bus lines, four hotels, twenty-four attorneys, and eight retail grocers.

“Look at that, where’s that?” asked a student. During my recent visit to Helena-West Helena, I spent time at a local charter school working on a poetry project with students. We had interrupted our writing to visit the Cultural Center to examine Johnson’s photographs.

“It’s Helena,” I said matter-of-factly.

“No,” another student replied.

“Read the information next to it,” I pointed to the text beside it.

The student read aloud, “Walnut Street, Helena.” She paused, taking in the words. “That’s not Walnut. What are all those buildings?”

“Do you remember when we built the garden?” I ask referring to a community garden that many of the charter school students had helped to till and plant, located on the edge of Walnut Street, a block from where their school now stands. She nodded. “Do you remember the bricks we kept pulling from the ground and the tile in front of the greenhouse?” She nodded again. “That’s this building here,” I said pointing to the theater.

“That’s the Malco<sup>5</sup> on Cherry.”

“No, that’s the Miller Theater on Walnut, where the garden is. It was a theater for African Americans.” We both looked at the picture again. We pointed out other landmarks we remembered but had been knocked down in the last two years under the guise of revitalization. “That’s the International Grocer<sup>6</sup> building, that’s the printer’s building, and there’s where Ronny’s used to be.” We both stood there looking at the other pictures, one of

---

<sup>5</sup> The Malco Theater was a movie theater during the 1900s. However, the theater, no longer owned by the Malco corporation, is used to stage community events. During its years as a movie theater, it served the town’s white population, refusing to admit African Americans.

<sup>6</sup> The International Grocer was a local grocery distributor best known for its financing of the King Biscuit Time radio program. It occupied almost a complete block on the predominately African American Walnut Street.

B.B. King performing at the middle school, one of Magnolia's packed with people; but "Walnut Street, Helena" drew us both back.

Earlier that morning I had taken a photograph from a nearly identical location on Walnut Street. However, instead of the cars and neatly kept buildings, the picture showed two abandoned gas stations, empty lots, destroyed and crumbling buildings. The road was nearly empty in the middle of the business day.

Under native Arkansan President Clinton, development was supported through rural USDA efforts, but even that failed to elicit any substantial change. Visiting August 7, 1999 in Helena during his presidency, he announced that "...our country had produced nineteen million jobs, and then some, since [he] became President. But the unemployment rate in the deep Delta is still twice the national average. The income is less than two-thirds the national average." No reform in the last few decades has done anything to fix the underlying problems. Hope that the African American population once had for its children is now tempered by reality. Fearing that the school system is to blame, white parents formed private academies during the period of integration, which happened substantially later here than it did in other places, as late as the early 1970s. However, not even the white academies have done much to erase the reinforced internalized strife.

Students' writing reflects this experience. The students of S.T.A.R.S. Academy<sup>7</sup>, an alternative school where I once taught, compiled their poetry on a weblog with the help of their English teacher, Michelle Kuo. Malik Issah agonizes over his future, "I worry how my life will be in the future, / whether I will have a job and not be on the streets" (Issah, 2006). Derrick Johnson contemplates the consequences of the poverty in the areas around him,

---

<sup>7</sup> S.T.A.R.S. (Students Tapping Academia Resources for Success) Academy is an alternative to the district's traditional junior high/high school located in the Helena Crossing area of Helena-West Helena close to the Mississippi River levees.

“When I see / The word / Poverty / The first place that comes to mind is / West Helena. / ...It’s like a tradition. / Everyone falls victim to the same two things / Drugs and babies” (Johnson, 2006). Latoya Jackson attributes these problems to the constant verbal barrage of oppression. She writes, “Growing up in Helena / I have heard a lot of nasty things. / They will tell you that / you will never make it in school and in life. / They will tell you that / you will make babies and not / have a job to take care of them. / They will tell you a lot of the things / to make you to not succeed in life. / They will tell you things to make you want to quit in / life and give up” (Jackson, 2006).

“These kids are so depressed,” one teacher says to me as our students waited in line for the restrooms, “so young to be so depressed, we weren’t like this.” She shakes her head and clucks.

I imagined she meant the statement rhetorically. “What’s changed, you think?” I ask anyway. I can think of several reasons for our students to be depressed but I hesitated from saying this out loud. I had read recently that the director of admissions for Harvard University graduated from the Helena-West Helena school system, along with a Chicago city council member, and countless doctors (medical and academic). But all of these individuals, all African Americans, were part of the school system in the pre-integration era. Over the last thirty years, the period of time when poverty became worse, integration has been the single largest event.

The teacher shrugged. The subject changed.

“Tell me what it was like before integration,” I requested at the teacher lunch table one day. I wanted to know what it was like, what happened, how the town reacted. I didn’t get much. Until the mid-seventies integration was voluntary and most African American



students stayed at the school named for an African American teacher and social activist, Eliza Miller, and the white students remained segregated at Central High School, I was told matter-of-factly. When the threat of involuntary desegregation arose, the white population began in earnest to build the private academy. The teachers also reported that many of the African American teachers were let go because they were not thought to have an aptitude for teaching, at least not one sufficient enough to teach white students. The white teachers were far superior in this regard, it was widely believed. However, unsure what to do with the new population in their classroom, the white teachers may have lowered their standards expecting very little from their African American pupils, behaviorally, academically, or otherwise. Then the situation became cyclical – low expectations, students had no reason to work hard, teachers expected less, students did less – and we ended up with the system we have now.

## **LEARNING TO TEACH**

“Everything you teach must be geared for the Benchmark exams,” I was instructed during my first day of district-wide professional development during my first year of teaching. “We can! We must! We will succeed!” we repeated the district motto in unison several times. “Passing this test is our only option.” We were let go later that day with a reminder that the buses that would transport us to Conway, just outside of Little Rock, would leave at 6:30 a.m. for what the teachers irreverently called the state failure conference. Early the next morning we arrived in Conway’s conference center. We were corralled into a large meeting space with other school districts that had also been labeled as in academic distress or failure. On this day, the room was filled mainly with African American teachers and administrators. I say this not suggesting that these teachers are inadequate but rather the measures of success are not geared to all racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups equally. Most school districts were from areas along the Mississippi River or the southwest corner of the state, by far the poorest areas of Arkansas. The morning opened with admonition for needing this conference, quickly followed by inspirational words that there was indeed hope for our school districts, our schools, and our students.

“Who knows what Bloom’s Taxonomy is?” one state workshop leader asked later in the day. The workshop attendees sat quietly, not unaware of Bloom’s Taxonomy, but thinking the question was asked rhetorically. “No one knows?” The workshop that day was

filled with Teach for America corps members, probably because its description seemed most relevant to our instruction.

“Now I’m going to divide you into groups.” Condescendingly, we were counted off and moved to our respective groups. “I’m going to give you these objectives. I want you to match them with the different levels on Bloom’s Taxonomy. When you figure it out, go tape the objective underneath it.” As instructed, we posted our responses and were rewarded for our correct answers with candy. However, no further instruction was given on how to use this information to make our students more likely to pass the Benchmark exams.

As most first year teachers are, I was willing to follow the rules. When I was told to teach to the test, I easily acquiesced. I followed the formulaic five part lesson plan. I did not deviate too far from the traditional teacher-centered classroom. I assigned seats for my students. I followed the same schedule every day. I diagnosed my students’ reading and writing abilities with standardized tests. If my will to follow the rules would have allowed my students to pass the test, I would have been very successful in the first two months. Following this rote learning, my students got nowhere. I abandoned the grammar textbook. I photocopied literature. We pushed our chairs defiantly into different formations. We broke the rules.

“Where’s the textbook?” a new student asked. Students were frequently added to my classroom as they were suspended or expelled by the middle or high school.

“What textbook?” I replied to his question.

“Uh, the one we use.” He pointed to one of the many textbooks that were now supporting a shelf in my bookcase.

“Oh, we don’t use those here.” His eyes grew wider. He looked like he was about to protest the lack of textbooks. “How are we going to learn?”

“How long have you been using those textbooks?” He stared at me then stared back at the textbooks.

“I think I’ve used the green one twice and the red one three times,” he answered thoughtfully as he looked at the stack of textbooks.

“What’s a direct object?”

“Huh?”

“Where do you put the punctuation marks in dialogue?”

“What?”

I repeated the questions, rephrasing them, just in case I had thrown him off guard. He still had no answer. “So you’ve used those textbooks for five years. It doesn’t look like they’ve been very helpful. How about you try it my way for a little bit?” He sat silently. “I promise you’ll learn to write. Besides, my way’s more fun.”

The scene would repeat itself nearly identically with each new student that entered my classroom. They’d protest the lack of grammar textbooks or the fact that they had to read a book but gradually if a grammar textbook appeared, they would protest its appearance. “What’s that?” they would question.

I went home sick one afternoon. A colleague pulled out a grammar textbook for busy work. My students protested, “We only use those books when we have trouble with a specific part of grammar. We don’t use it for busy work.” My colleague later reported their protest to me.

As we read and wrote, we talked about audience, purpose, style, tone, and voice. We also discussed when it was acceptable to use standard and non-standard English (terms I would later abandon in favor of more positive terms). We examined texts like King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and Gaines's *Lesson Before Dying*. As we neared the 11<sup>th</sup> grade Benchmark literacy exam, we felt prepared, particularly for the writing portion. I proctored the exam the day it was given.

"Ms. Charpentier, it was easy," Jameel exclaimed after I had taken the test booklets and turned them into the principal.

"That's great! Tell me what it was about."

"We had this one essay question. It was crunk. The question said write a letter to your friend telling him about your favorite music group and why you like him."

"What did you write?" I inquired.

"I started it out just like a letter should, like the instructions said. I started with the salutation; I called my friend by his nickname because he was the audience of the letter. Then I had an introduction paragraph, body paragraphs, and a closing paragraph. I told him all about Three Six [Mafia]. That group is totally off the hizzee. I even quoted some lyrics, the gangsta ones I know he'd like." He was almost glowing with excitement at the thought of passing the Literacy Test. He continued, "I kept it non-standard since my friend is from the 'hood. I was keeping it real."

Jameel was an eloquent writer by any standard and if he thought he had produced an excellent essay, I was inclined to believe him. But going home that afternoon, something made me uncomfortable about the question. It was not like others I had seen. I picked up the phone and called a colleague in a school district north of me.

“If the instructions say you should write a letter to a friend, it’s okay to write it in letter format, isn’t it?” I asked.

“They are really looking for an essay. He probably didn’t read the top part that said write an essay.”

“Oh. Maybe they can see past it, he thought he had a pretty cohesive letter with an introduction, body, and conclusion. He included some quotations from his favorite music group Three Six Mafia.”

“Have you heard the lyrics?”

“Yes.”

“They’ll probably score him lower for the hardcore lyrics.”

Despite what may have been Jameel’s stellar performance, the failing test scores that the district earns each year are a fairly accurate representation of our students’ educational experience. By 2005, the district graduation rate had dropped to 54.7% while the state’s remains nearly constant at 81%. In nearly every category, the district earns twenty percent fewer scores in the proficient and advanced categories than the state average. Perhaps the most alarming statistics are in the middle school category. One in five students is retained at some point during middle school, some for more than one year. The achievement gap between Eliza Miller Junior High and the state average reaches thirty five percentage points in some academic categories.

The school district, as a result of the low scores, has been labeled as ‘in academic distress’ for several years. However, during the 2003 school year, the Arkansas Department of Education chose to lower the requirements for being in academic distress. Several schools that had been previously labeled in distress were considered adequate. Helena-West Helena,

which was close to being taken over for academic failure, was spared the state department of education's wrath. To celebrate, the administration released students early to attend a large party and parade downtown, which they called SuccessFest. The fact that our students' scores did not change barely elicited a discussion among top-level district administrators. In fact, quite the opposite happened. State Senator Steven Higginbotham even remarked, "I'm just proud of the Helena-West Helena School District for coming out of Academic [sic.] distress."

"I think it's indicative of the hard work of the administration, faculty, and students. This is wonderful, the turnout of so many people, the excitement of being a part of this. I just hope this day of celebration will create some enthusiasm for future successes;" State Representative Barbara King said, "again, congratulations to each and every one of you." King concluded, "And may God's blessings always be with you."

Having had many students attend the festivities, we discussed what the party was celebrating in class. We discussed the fairness of the exams but also the responsibility we need to take for our low scores.

"It's like those analogies Ms. Charpentier. Remember I didn't know nothing about a regatta." Marquez was referring to our discussion based on Linda Christensen's *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*. He stated very clearly and succinctly, "If this test was in my language, I'd get a 100." Originally, I interpreted his statement to mean his way of speaking but now I realize it was a much bigger language, more a way of being, a Discourse. If the test reflected how he lived and what he valued, he would do better. I have no doubt that is true because in terms of his community, Marquez was knowledgeable. Unfortunately, the reality then and now is that the

students in the Helena-West Helena school district will be required, in every avenue of life, to meet the same standards that those schooled in wealthier, more White communities must. Lowering the bar for them here only creates false expectations for situations outside of their community. More importantly, a separate standard does not require the local school district to be held accountable for failing to produce a literate student body capable of meeting minimum standards for admission to the community college or to be successful outside of Helena-West Helena.

Failure is not an option, I was told at my first district professional development, except it is, or at least that is what the residents of Helena-West Helena have been led to believe through celebrations like SuccessFest and the School Performance Index in Arkansas. Released in early 2006, the “School Performance Index in Arkansas” from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville’s Department of Education Reform presents a new way of examining achievement in the state, as well as across the country. The paper argues that test scores are in part a reflection of the quality of education as well as the advantage and disadvantages of the school. Green, Barnett, Ritters, and Winter (2006) control for characteristics and resources of Arkansas students to determine schoolwide performance. Based on income, educational attainment, percentage of Hispanic students in the school district, percentage of Black students in the district, percentage of married families, percentage of free/reduced lunches, the researchers predict a school test score. Thus, the lower the income, educational attainment, married families, and the greater the percentage of Black/Hispanic students and free/reduced lunch, there were fewer expectations of high test scores. The researchers then took the actual scores and divided them by the predicted scores and multiplied the quotient by one hundred. If a school earned greater than one hundred,



they were doing better than expected. If a school earned less than one hundred, they were doing worse than was to be expected given characteristics and resources. Scores at one hundred indicated schools were doing as expected. These results are termed the school performance index.

Based on the demographics of Helena-West Helena, it seems unlikely that the predicted score would be very high, though the researchers do not release this figure in their report. The school district scored a 124.11 as a whole, ranking fourth in the state. In the report's final release, the researchers write:

Finally, we find that some districts that are often considered "low performers" received an SPI higher than the state and national averages, while some districts regarded as "high performers" received an SPI lower than the state and national averages. For example, the Helena-West Helena School District has received much negative attention because of its low test scores and administrative scandals. However, once the severe disadvantage of students in that area are taken into account, Helena-West Helena received an SPI of 124.1 which ranks 4<sup>th</sup> of the 255 districts in Arkansas (Green, Barnett, Ritters, and Winter, 2006).

It continues, "While we should not be satisfied with the low test scores produced in Helena, we should recognize that the district is doing an admirable job of trying to rise above the challenges it faces" (Green, Barnett, Ritters, and Winter, 2006).

## **RETURNING TO HELENA-WEST HELENA**

On my first night back in Helena-West Helena after leaving teaching, I sit in Feeney's, a small new barbecue/down-home restaurant that had replaced a previously popular barbecue joint. Cherry-speckled curtains adorned the windows to the new addition. As we drank purple drink and iced tea, we discussed the School Performance Index that had been released a few weeks prior. Most of those at the table now taught or worked for the only local charter school in the county; most had not read the full report that had been published. At least the premise, they thought, was antithetical and also biased. Someone suggested that she had heard the superintendent speak about the study and that he understood that the study was based on the expectation that low-income students would have poor academic achievement. But having little information on the actual report or additional comments by the superintendent, the conversation ended quickly and we moved to discussion concerning local changes.

Several weeks later, I attended a town hall meeting on schools, as school board meetings have become known now that the state has taken over the school district. The meeting passed very quickly, almost efficiently. The interruptions that had previously been present prior to takeover were now curiously absent, though the room was nearly empty compared to the standing room only crowd that marked the enormous controversies that marred the school district in years past. The meeting consisted of updates on the budget, congratulations to students and teachers for various achievements, and matters to research.

The meeting had almost concluded when the acting superintendent, appointed by the commissioner of the Arkansas Department of Education, suddenly remembered that local assistant superintendent Roy Bridges had an announcement.

He began, “I have some good news to announce that we recently learned about.” As I had been studying the district for quite some time, I was surprised to hear what the news might be. I did not expect the study to be part of the discussion tonight since the report had been released prior in the local newspaper prior to the previous town hall meeting.

Bridges held up a large clipping. He continued, “This shows that we are doing an excellent job educating our students. It is good to be recognized for the hard work we do.” I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Had it not been a public forum, I may have interrupted and attempted to explain what the study was saying. “We are fourth in the state overall. We are better than the Little Rock School District, better than Barton/Lexa. Even better than KIPP<sup>8</sup> [the local charter school].” I grumbled though only to myself. I wanted to shout that he had misinterpreted what he had read. It was not that we were better but that we had a tougher situation and given what our kids were expected to do, we had done better.

I expected that the superintendent would attempt to clarify the article. However, he added that “we have something to be proud of.” I have trouble classifying my immediate emotion, though I am inclined to call it rage, as a result of his statement. I wanted to tell the small crowd that if you compared the education my students received versus the education I had only five years prior during my school years, I am not sure that my statements would have been warmly received.

---

<sup>8</sup> KIPP: Delta Collage Preparatory School is a local charter school that is a part of the Knowledge is Power Program begun in Houston, Texas by Teach for America alumni that now has more than fifty schools in its network. The KIPP networks premise is that with commitments from teachers, parents, and students, and extra time in schools students from underserved communities can make significant academic gains.

I had conducted surveys of my students as they entered my classroom for the first time to gauge their interest and dexterity in their previous education. Most of my students had read, on average, fewer than one book per year during their last year of school. Most students wrote no more than a handful of pages. If the goal was to produce college-bound, college-ready students for this community, the district was failing miserably. Of those who made it to college, eighty-four percent would require remediation. Perhaps the district and the local chamber of commerce had failed to communicate; perhaps the district and the local revitalization committee had failed to share their plans; or perhaps the goal, as my students often suggested in their writing, was to oppress them.

Luckily, the teachers at the local charter school and I were not the only ones who stood opposed to the study and its findings. Two local newspapers offered articles and editorials to counterbalance the press release from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville's School of Education Reform.

Reform, I remind myself, is to correct defects or errors, to alter into a better form or condition. I take a deep breath as I read the opposing viewpoints, scared that Arkansas's two larger newspapers might offer only a cursory analysis of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville's press release. *The Arkansas Times* editorial, at least, explains the irony in the study:

The School Performance Index concluded that the schools that were supposed to have made a mess of education, judging by standardized test scores and financial accounting, actually were the most effective educators in the state. Far and away the best school was Altheimer, which has been on probation for lousy performance. Others at the top were east and south Arkansas schools with abysmally low average test scores. At the bottom were some of those celebrated for their high quality. ... If the index is valid, the most effective teaching in Arkansas is going on at schools where test scores are low and where teachers have weak credentials and below-average salaries. Scores of schools like that are at the top of the rankings. They rank high because when you factor all the learning

problems that children bring to the classroom – extreme poverty and poorly educated single parents – the school adds more value to their education than do teachers in schools with kids of richer, white, better educated and traditional parents.

The *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* correspondingly addresses the irony but continues, offering a sardonic essay. It editorializes:

We're glad to hear that. 'Cause if we didn't know any better, we'd think it was a dandy way to make some schools less accountable. As in, "Hey, you can expect only so much from these poor kids." ... So long as the message isn't: Don't worry your poor little heads about it, kids. You're not expected to be very smart, anyway. So you can't be expected to get as good an education as the privileged classes. And our worst schools are really our best when you think about the sorry human material they have to work with.

I sigh with relief after reading this article, no longer afraid that I was the only one who saw this study as insidious. At the same time, I wonder if the school districts who appeared at the top of the list are heralding the study in hopes that industries might take notice. Currently, many of the local chamber of commerces are actively vocalizing for a better education system so that they can convince large corporations with large tax bases that Arkansas and its small counties are a place to start a business, raise a family, and purchase goods and services. If their school districts can prove that they provide a valuable education, it is a first step in encouraging new industry. But I am not sure that the local communities have thought that strategically. The *Democrat-Gazette's* suggestion that blame is less likely to be placed on the district and teachers for the students' continued failure is a more likely consequence. I do not think teachers are solely to blame. They work with incredibly limited tools on a daily basis. For the most part, many live on the edge, some surviving only because of a second job at Wal-Mart at night, exhausted by the time they end their day. The teachers I know care deeply about their students but their family's survival is paramount.

## **CONCLUSION**

I am still overwhelmed by my emotions as I drive out of Helena-West Helena. As I turn right on Columbia/Biscoe/Highway 48, I see the brightly colored cinder block housing that so many of my students lived in had been torn down. I hear it will be replaced by a park to suggest the vigor and beauty on the drive into town. Downtown, the decrepit International Grocery Building is gone. A pool haunt is missing.

While I came to teach by happenstance, I pursued graduate education by choice and with conviction. I am less idealistic now about the situation of schools after teaching in them. While I still believe education can be powerful I know that is not how education works in many of the places I have visited or in the town where I primarily taught. In fact, in many cases, I find the education to be restrictive and uninspiring. I tried in my own classroom to be imaginative and to foster an educational space that was alternative in its use of teaching methods. Along the way I got in trouble for unorthodox practices, was kicked out of a professional development seminar for questioning the tenets of the work, and was forced to use a partially scripted curriculum in order to help my students get promoted. My own future nor my family's survival relied on continuing to teach so in many ways I had considerably more freedom than those of my colleagues. As a result, I was less afraid of the demands placed on me by the state and the school district.

Physically, mentally, and emotionally, teaching was demanding, more demanding than anything I have ever done or will do. I, like many of my Teach for America colleagues, often

spent thirty to forty additional hours each week preparing to teach, organizing co-curricular activities, tutoring students, reading about teaching, and researching. When I went back to Helena-West Helena, I had considered the possibility of returning to teach here.

But since I have left the Helena-West Helena School District, much has changed. My principal, who supported my teaching, has moved into an administrative position. The roommates who provided much mental and emotional counsel have left to pursue other education-related employment. Standardized testing and the *No Child Left Behind* Act place more emphasis on testing than ever before. The school district has been through at least three superintendents and been plagued with issues of nepotism, failure to follow bidding procedures, and sexual harassment lawsuits. Several school board employees and contractors have been indicted as a result of their alleged involvement in the aforementioned activities. As a result, the Arkansas Department of Education took over the school district and continues to preside over the districts decisions and budget.

I drove fifteen hours because I thought I had the answers to this town's problems that I could solve through my research. But looking at these buildings, staring at the faces, watching students, I know that I do not have a panacea. I wanted this paper to offer solutions to the critical problems. But like everyone else I fail to see an immediate solution. I imagine that education has to be the solution but the education has to encourage the students to return here, not to leave forever, like so many people with education have. This town is a land of history and hardship. The hardship is omnipresent; the history absent from the curriculum.

I wish that in my conclusion I could tell you that as a teacher I had solutions that worked. I cannot. My students achieved in my classroom but it was never enough. Pitted against standardized exams, my students improved 3.5 grade levels but they never reached grade level.

My students learned to write beyond the standard five paragraph essay but not enough to allow them to avoid remediation in college, if they made it there. My students learned about consequences in the classroom but not enough to avoid teenage pregnancy or death. I still do not doubt my power to help transform unjust situations but it is more limited than I was led to believe growing up. I could not prevent death when a student was shot as he robbed a flower shop; I could not get LaTisha into college; I could not bring several students up to grade level once they left my classroom; I could not prevent Maleeka from dropping out of school to support her sisters. I can only write in hope that small step by small step we can reform education in the Mississippi Delta and communities like it.



## REFERENCES

- (2003) “(Arkansas) State Report Card 2003,” Arkansas School Performance Report. Retrieved: <http://130.184.43.9/reportcards/select.php>, April 10, 2006.
- (2004) “(Arkansas) State Report Card 2004,” Arkansas School Performance Report. Retrieved: <http://130.184.43.9/reportcards/select.php>, April 10, 2006.
- (2005) “(Arkansas) State Report Card 2005,” Arkansas School Performance Report. Retrieved: <http://130.184.43.9/reportcards/select.php>, April 10, 2006.
- (2003) “(Helena-West Helena School District) Report Card 2003,” Arkansas School Performance Report. Retrieved: <http://130.184.43.9/reportcards/select.php>, April 10, 2006.
- (2004) “(Helena-West Helena School District) Report Card 2004,” Arkansas School Performance Report. Retrieved: <http://130.184.43.9/reportcards/select.php>, April 10, 2006.
- (2005) “(Helena-West Helena School District) Report Card 2005,” Arkansas School Performance Report. Retrieved: <http://130.184.43.9/reportcards/select.php>, April 10, 2006.
- (29 January 2006). “A new yardstick? Or another excuse for bad schools?” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, Retrieved: [www.ardemgaz.com/ShowStoryTemplate.asp?Path=ArDemocrat/2006/01/29&ID=Ar10200&Section=Editorial](http://www.ardemgaz.com/ShowStoryTemplate.asp?Path=ArDemocrat/2006/01/29&ID=Ar10200&Section=Editorial), March 30, 2006.
- Barnes, Kenneth C. (2003). *Journey of Hope: The Back to Africa Movement in Arkansas in the Late 1800s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Christensen, Linda. (2000). *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*, Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, Ltd.
- Cobb, James C. (1994). *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*. Oxford, MS: Oxford University Press.
- Dumas, Ernest. (2 February 2006). “Testing Flunks,” *Arkansas Times*. Retrieved: <http://arktimes.com/Articles/ArticleViewer.aspx?ArticleID=3c2b05ce-b335-45d0-9cc2-3b29001e7de7>, March 30, 2006.
- Ellis, Carolyn. (2004). *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Ellis, Carolyn and Arthur P. Bochner. (2000). “Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject” in Denzin, Norman K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. (2000). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Gaines, Ernest J. *A Lesson Before Dying*, New York: Random House.

Greene, Jay P., Joshua Barnett, Gary W. Ritter, and Marcus A. Winters. (2006). The School Performance Index in Arkansas. Retrieved: [http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep/der\\_spi\\_index.htm](http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep/der_spi_index.htm), February 1, 2006.

Hammonds, Phyllis Y., Henri Linton, Steve Johnson, Paul Hooven, Brian Williams. (2004). *African-American Life in the Arkansas Delta: Through the Lens of Rogerline Johnson 1952 – 1971*, Helena: African-American Delta African-American Historical Society.

hooks, bell. (2000). *All about Love: New Visions*. New York: Harper Collins.

hooks, bell. (2003). *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Routledge.

Issah, Malik. (11 April 2006). “I am Strong, Black, and Intelligent.” *STARS Poets*. STARS Academy. Retrieved: <http://starpoets.blogspot.com/>, April 20, 2006.

Jackson, Latoya. (23 January 2006). “It’s Hard to Hate.” *STARS Poets*. STARS Academy. Retrieved: <http://starpoets.blogspot.com/>, April 20, 2006.

Johnson, Derrick. (15 March 2006). “Poverty.” *STARS Poets*. STARS Academy. Retrieved: <http://starpoets.blogspot.com/>, April 20, 2006.

King, Jr. Martin Luther. (1963). “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” In *Why We Can’t Wait*, Martin Luther King, Jr. ed.

Kohl, Rhonda M. (2004) “ ‘This God Forsaken Town’: Death and Disease at Helena, Arkansas, 1862-63.” *Civil War History* 50(2), pps. 109 – 144. Retrieved: [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/civil\\_war\\_history/v050/50.2kohl.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/civil_war_history/v050/50.2kohl.html) , April 14, 2006.

Lincoln, Yvonna S. “When research is not enough: Community, Care, Love,” *Review of Higher Education*, Vol. 23(3), pps. 241-256

Moore, Rayburn S. (1994). “Sam Clemens and Helena, Arkansas: An unpublished letter of 1889.” *Mark Twain Journal*, Vol. 32(1)

Troy, Josh. (3 November 2003). “Success Fest celebrates academic achievement.” *Helena Daily World*. Retrieved: [www.helena-arkansas.com/articles/2003/11/03/news/news2.txt](http://www.helena-arkansas.com/articles/2003/11/03/news/news2.txt) , April 20, 2006.

Wright, Richard. (1944). *Black Boy*. New York: Harper Collins.

Zinn, Howard. (1964). *The Southern Mystique*. New York: South End Press.